

DEFINING WILDERNESS WITH PICTURES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract.—Definitions of wilderness have varied across time and cultures. Understanding the way that wilderness is perceived provides insight into both the level of support it receives in American society and the way in which it is managed within that context. Traditionally, definitions have been text-based. This study utilized participant-generated photographs to examine representations of wilderness. Participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of settings that represented wilderness to them. They were then asked to rank their photos in the order in which they most represented wilderness. Key features in the photos ranked as most representative of wilderness included mountains, lakes, and heavily forested areas.

The findings in this exploratory study indicate that the participants' representations of wilderness match those settings which have been historically described as wilderness. However, this may have been a reflection of prior knowledge and peer influence, along with other external factors.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Wilderness has been defined both culturally and legally over the last 100 years. The legal definition states that wilderness

“in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

- Wilderness Act, 1964

Culturally, wilderness is defined as many things, from any natural area, to the “urban” wilderness. This dates back to biblical times when wilderness was regarded as those places that man feared, and where man was

sent by God to be punished (Nash 2001). As a socially constructed concept, definitions of wilderness have evolved over the years (Nash 2001, Hammitt et al. 2001). Further, the word is used in many contexts (e.g., urban wilderness) and it has become less meaningful in terms of representing a type of landscape or setting. Thus, it is important to understand the way that wilderness is viewed today. Understanding variations in the way that wilderness is defined by users can inform the management process; for example, it can provide insight into any variation in definition between visitors and managers.

Definitions of wilderness have typically been constructed with the written word, although visual representations by artists (e.g., Thomas Moran, Ansel Adams) have also been utilized. Further, the collection of visual data has been adopted to provide an alternative means to examine outdoor recreation settings, such as the visitor's connection to the setting (Loeffler 2004). Photographs have also been used to examine standards of quality (Manning & Freimund 2004), place attachment (Stedman et al. 2004), and landscape preferences (Palmberg & Kuru 2000). The purpose of this study was to determine patterns of image content when photography is used to represent perceptions of wilderness. As an exploratory study, a secondary purpose was to determine the reliability and validity of the methodology.

1.1 Traditional Definitions of Wilderness

The Judeo-Christian tradition defined wilderness as cursed land, evil places, and places without water. This was often a desert area. The importance of wilderness in this context was revealed by the paradox that while wilderness was evil, it was a necessary evil; it was a place where one could become closer to God, a refuge, and a testing ground. Jumping forward to the Puritan tradition, wilderness was viewed as a threat to survival, and man's ability to conquer the wilderness would put him in God's favor. This was a utilitarian view of nature; cultivation and civilization in place of wilderness were deemed necessary to make the land useful in practical terms as well as to curry God's favor (Nash 2001).

Moving forward again to the Romantic and Transcendentalist eras, the view of wilderness began to be viewed in more favorable terms. The Romantic movement brought about “an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary and mysterious” (Nash, 2001, p. 47). The concept of primitivism was introduced, suggesting that “man’s happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization” (Nash 2001, p. 47). Transcendentalists emphasized the spiritual quality of the wilderness experience, proposing that it brought one closer to God, and emphasizing the importance of material objects in this quest: “For this reason natural objects assumed importance because, if rightly seen, they reflected universal spiritual truths” (Nash 2001, p. 85).

Early 20th century definitions include those offered by Sigurd Olson—“wilderness means escape from the perplexing problems of everyday life and freedom from the tyranny of wires, bells, schedules, and pressing responsibility” (Backes 2001, p. 44) and by the founders of the Wilderness Society, “that extremely minor fraction of America which yet remains free from mechanical sights and sounds and smell” (Yard et al. 1935). A legal definition for wilderness was set by the Wilderness Act of 1964, defining wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation,” and as a place that “generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature” and that “has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” (6 U.S.C. 1131-1136, 78 Statutes 890).

1.2 Using Images for Evaluation

Images have been used to represent nature in general and wilderness in particular. Ansel Adams used photography while artists such as Thomas Moran used paintings to portray wild places. More recently, images have been used to examine a variety of outdoor recreation phenomena including standards of quality (Manning et al. 1995), the importance of water to the visitor experience (Taylor et al. 1995), and crowding (Manning et al. 2000). Photography has also been used to examine specific preferences, such as visual preferences when rock climbing (Jones et al. 2004), as well as general meanings such as the meaning of the outdoor experience (Loeffler 2004).

2.0 METHODS

ECOE is a semester-long course in the department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Administration (RPTA) at Western Illinois University. Students spent the Fall 2004 semester in the field studying environmental conservation and outdoor education. The trip included visits to Badlands National Park in South Dakota, Yellowstone National Park and the Wind River Range in Wyoming, the Ansel Adams Wilderness and Yosemite, Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks in California, Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, and the Baja Peninsula in California.

The 2004 ECOEE course included 16 undergraduate students, one graduate student and two instructors. The 16 undergraduate students were provided with disposable cameras and instructed to take photographs of settings that represented their perceptions of wilderness. The students were also issued a brief survey to determine their level of experience with wilderness areas prior to this trip. Upon their return, students were asked to indicate where each photograph was taken. Each student was then asked to rank the photographs by the extent to which they represented wilderness.

Once the students had ranked their photographs, the researcher examined each photograph and identified specific elements contained therein. Elements proposed to represent wilderness over time, including desert, absence of humans and human sign, and specific natural features such as water, forests, and mountains were among the items identified. Each participant’s group of photographs was also divided into thirds to form groups ranging from most representative to least representative of wilderness. This division, to be used as a point of reference, was determined after discussions with the participants indicated that their pictures generally fell into three groups along the continuum.

3.0 RESULTS

Of the sixteen cameras that were distributed, ten were returned with a total of 174 usable photographs. Seventy percent of the ten respondents were from rural areas and 30 percent were from suburban areas. The average time that the students had been in the RPTA major



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

was two and one half years. Prior to this trip, two of the respondents had never visited a wilderness area, five had visited one to five areas and three had visited more than five wilderness areas. None of the respondents had worked in a wilderness area. Finally, 90 percent of the respondents had studied wilderness in at least one class.

Many of the students' photographs were similar in that very few contained roads, trails, or people. Prominent features in the highest ranked photographs ("most like wilderness") were mountains, lakes, and heavily forested areas (see Figure 1). The highest ranked photographs include the top third of photos taken by each respondent, which were generally the top five photographs taken by each participant. A few of these included desert photos from Joshua Tree National Park, but most desert

scenes were ranked lower than mountains and forests as representing wilderness. The most common elements of the highest ranked photographs were water (lakes and streams), mountains, and forests. Only one of the highest ranked photographs included a person and only one included a trail (see Figure 2).

Photographs that least represented wilderness (lowest third as ranked by each participant) had common elements as well. These photographs were more likely to include trails, roads, human sign (e.g., tire tracks), and people (see Figure 3). One beach scene was included by one participant. Sixty percent of respondents included scenes of snow and fog, but none of these pictures was ranked high or low; they were all ranked in the middle of the range (middle five to eight pictures).

4.0 DISCUSSION

Most of the photographs were representative of landscapes historically described as wilderness. It is significant to note the items that were not included in the highest ranked photographs, including human sign, people, desert, and trails. With few exceptions, even the “least like wilderness” photos were of landscapes devoid of most human sign. Images that included a visible trail tended to be ranked moderately, although it appeared to be a more acceptable human sign than tire tracks, photos of which were ranked very low. It should be noted that the few images with tire tracks were taken at Joshua Tree National Park; few photographs of desert scenes were highly ranked and none of these included human sign. However, this may be explained by the presence of vehicles rather than the desert setting itself. The highest ranked photographs were taken in places that motor vehicles could not reach. Another indicator was weather, which does not seem to highly influence the representation of wilderness. While the majority of respondents included photographs of scenes that included snow and/or fog, each of these participants ranked these images in the middle of the continuum of most to least like wilderness. Thus, they do reflect these participants’ interpretation of wilderness, but they do not stand out as either “most like wilderness” or “least like wilderness.” A number of issues, however, may explain these findings.

The first explanation lies in the directions given to the participants. They were instructed to take photographs of settings that represented wilderness to them. However, upon their return, they indicated that they had a tendency to take photographs in areas that they knew to be legally designated wilderness. The majority of the photographs were taken in the Wind River and Ansel Adams wilderness areas. Additionally, participants indicated that if one person identified a setting as appropriate for the study, several others would be in agreement and take a photograph of the same scene. For example, the lake shown in Figure 1 appeared in every participant’s set of images. Another issue in regard to participant bias was the experience outside of the setting itself. One participant noted that she ranked several photographs taken in the Ansel Adams wilderness rather

low because she remembered hearing an airplane flying overhead, which detracted from her experience and sense of being in the wilderness.

Another issue was their tendency to take photographs at the beginning of the four-month experience. Thus, only five respondents reached Joshua Tree National Park with film in their cameras, and only one participant made it past that park; this last respondent was the only one to include pictures from Baja. Most of the photographs were from the Wind River Range. One exception was Badlands National Park; although it was the first stop on their itinerary, there were no photographs included from this site.

Another issue was the use of RPTA students. While the ECOEE trip provides an opportunity to include images from a variety of settings, only RPTA students participate. Thus, they all have had some level of exposure to the concept of wilderness, and continue to learn a great deal about the concept while participating in ECOEE. Thus, their knowledge of wilderness is greatly increased during the course of the trip and, subsequently, the study.

Another methodological issue was the cameras themselves. The durability of these cameras surpassed the researcher’s expectations, as they were dropped off cliffs, in streams and buried in snow. Only one of the cameras listed as unreturned was due to damage. It was not possible to retrieve photographs from that camera. However, three of the five remaining unreturned cameras were lost. Another issue in regard to the cameras is the number of photographs that may be taken. Use of disposable digital cameras may allow participants to take a greater number of photographs, as might traditional digital cameras. A related issue was the burden of carrying two cameras; each of the participants had his or her own camera in addition to the camera issued for the study.

The next step in the development of this approach is to have participants take pictures of natural settings, without instructing them to take photographs of wilderness in particular. Thus, the rankings of the

photographs in regard to representation of wilderness may have greater meaning as they may include a wider range of images and image content. It would also be beneficial to a future study to utilize either digital cameras or multiple cameras to reduce the tendency to run out of film halfway through the trip. Additionally, an opportunity to select participants outside of the park and recreation discipline may yield different results. Finally, while the use of images may indicate settings that represent wilderness to the participants, other aspects of the experience that do not necessarily appear in the image (e.g., the sound of a plane flying overhead) may affect the perception of a particular setting as wilderness. Use of a photo diary to explain the experience at the time the photograph was taken may add more meaning to the pictures themselves.

In general, the findings in this exploratory study indicate that these RPTA students identify wilderness primarily with natural landscapes lacking human sign, particularly mountains, lakes, and forests. As many continue to question the preservation of wilderness and debate the uses allowed within, it continues to be important to understand what people mean when they speak of wilderness. Using photographs to enhance these definitions may be one way to gain a greater understanding of the meanings behind the words in text-based definitions.

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